

August 31, 2025 – Tsuchiura Megumi Church Worship Message

Care Department Deacon – *Takashi Inoue*

Title: “Live”

Introduction

Good morning.

I think there may have been some who were surprised that today's Scripture passage and the message title are almost the same as those of Pastor Che last week. Pastor Che and I were the most surprised, as last week we opened our eyes wide and looked at each other. That is because both of us had been shown by God, already a month ago, to give a message from this Scripture passage. But I interpreted this not as mere coincidence, but rather as God's preparation, help, and one-sided grace toward the clumsy exhortation of a believer. Praise be to His Name.

Today is also a Worship Service for Welfare of Persons with Disabilities, so beginning from Ezekiel, while quoting several passages of Scripture, I would like us to hear the teaching and the calling of God concerning the dignity of life and His word, “Live.”

First, I will read today's passage, Ezekiel 18:31–32.

“Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!”
—Ezekiel 18:31–32

1. Has it really become peace after the war?

Eighty years have passed since the defeat. If we think of problems such as the bases in Okinawa, there are “people who, even now at this very moment, have not yet reached postwar and continue to suffer.” The majority of Japanese, however, perhaps think that the war ended 80 years ago, and under the Peace Constitution, if one only looks inside the country, the hell of war in which multitudes of lives were taken has ended.

But is that really so?

In fact, there is a report that between 1950 and 2019, over seventy years, 38.9 million fetuses—that is, the small lives conceived in the wombs of mothers—were taken away through abortion. This number, 38.9 million, is twelve times the number of Japanese who died in World War II, and more than six times the six million Jews massacred in the Holocaust. The fact that more lives were buried than in war itself is hardly mentioned in media reports or programs reflecting on these 80 years after the war. The goal and idol of Japan's postwar period were the economic growth and the accumulation of wealth. Human value was measured by the yardstick of productivity, and those who did not fit into that measure were excluded and sacrificed.

The sacrifice of such small lives corresponds to the practice described in Ezekiel and other parts of Scripture, the offering of children—making them pass through the fire—as sacrifices to idols. Except for special circumstances, abortion is the sin of murder, even if the thinking of the world may be contrary. However, what is important here is not to lay all responsibility upon the individual. In the Gospel of John chapter 8 there is the account of the scribes and Pharisees bringing before Jesus a woman caught in adultery. But why is it that the man, who must have been present, is absent there?

If there is a society that makes being born with a disability into a misfortune, then we must not forget the perspective that each of us who shape that society bears responsibility. All the more, Christians and the Church, who know the dignity of human beings created in the image of God, must take this seriously.

2. The sin shown to the people

The prophet Ezekiel was given the mission of speaking God's message to the Israelites, who had become captives together with him in the land of captivity. Since Jerusalem had not yet fallen, the Israelites who had become captives were naively believing that they could return to their homeland. But Ezekiel prophesied to Israel, who continued to sin and fall into corruption before God, showing their sin and declaring that judgment would surely come. That judgment was also the discipline used by God in order to turn His sinful people back from their corrupt way of life.

So then, what is the sin that was shown to God's people who had fallen into corruption?

Simply put, it is "adultery" and "murder."

"Adultery" refers to an immoral way of life toward God, misconduct, sexual corruption, spiritual adultery, that which destroys oneself. "Murder" refers not only to literal murder, but also to indifference toward suffering neighbors, oppression, violence, exploitation, cold attitudes toward the poor, pressures and threats that drive people to death, and whatever deprives others of life. But these are not separate; if one traces back to the root, both arrive at the same source, idolatry.

Looking at Ezekiel chapter 16, Israel seemed to think they were safe because they had not committed the terrible sexual sins of Sodom, adultery, theft, and so on. But in verse 49 it is shown that the sin of Sodom was not only such sexual immorality, but also pride, laziness, gluttony, and failure to aid those in need.

"Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy."

—Ezekiel 16:49

And in verse 52 of the same chapter, it is shown that the corrupted state of Israel was even worse than that of Sodom.

In Ezekiel 18:5–23 it is written that across three generations—grandfather, father, and son—regardless of how the grandfather was, regardless of how the father was, if one turns back to God, one will live. Not by the sin of the ancestors, but by the way of life of the person himself, any sinner who turns to God will live. This was also touched upon in last week’s message. And another important point there is that idolatry, adultery, oppression of neighbors, and cold attitudes are spoken of in an integrated, comprehensive way. Let us look at 18:6–9.

“He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor’s wife or have sexual relations with a woman during her period. He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery, but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked. He does not lend to them at interest or take a profit from them. He withholds his hand from doing wrong and judges fairly between two parties. He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws. That man is righteous; he will surely live, declares the Sovereign Lord.”

-Ezekiel 18:6-9

The gospel is God’s grand plan reaching from the salvation of the human soul to the restoration of the whole created world, toward the completion of the new heavens and new earth. It is dynamic and comprehensive. This is the evangelical Christian understanding that is the world standard. Therefore, human sin also needs to be understood comprehensively—from individual sin, to one’s attitude toward neighbors, to environmental stewardship. In other words, to put it a bit sternly, even if we keep worship every Lord’s Day, give offerings, pray, and devote ourselves to service within the church, if we are indifferent to the pain, groaning, lament, and brokenness within our society and creation, then we are walking only half the walk as those justified by Christ.

Therefore, the existence of the *Karashidane* (Mustard Seed) ministry in Megumi Church has immense meaning. Even if one’s occupation is not directly welfare work, the whole church can respond to God’s expectation by seeking to live together with persons with disabilities, and by aiming to be a community that does not exclude people because of disability. Even if one is not directly involved in the *Karashidane* ministry, by praying, supporting, and encouraging, one can share in this work of grace. This is just like how, even if everyone is not called to be a missionary sent overseas, still for the missionary’s work, each one can do what he or she can—pray, give offerings, write letters, make visits—and even indirectly, they are sharing in the work of mission.

I have once visited mission fields such as China, Taiwan, and Sri Lanka. That was a precious experience in which I could feel directly the work of God. However, mission fields exist in much closer places as well. Yes, *Karashidane* and *Kiraku-Kiraku Service* are also mission fields to which God sends us.

This summer, though only for a short time, I was given the experience of spending time with the children of *Karashidane*. One child I came to know there is almost unable to speak. But it seems that he can sharply discern whether a person is unpleasant to him or one who gives him delight. At present I am serving once a week in the pick-up and drop-off service for *Kiraku-Kiraku Service*, and just last week in the morning at that time I encountered the scene of that child being brought to *Karashidane* by his guardian. When I said, “Good morning, ○○-chan,” and reached out my hand, he did not shake hands, but he gave me a “goo-bunch,” instead of a fist bump. The “goo-bunch” is a little painful, but in that moment I feel such joy as if I would jump up. That is because it feels like an expression that, for that child, not to mention from his parents, but also from many people at church, and above all from God, he is loved.

At Megumi Church there are places where you can easily have close-by mission experiences without airline tickets, without suitcases, without passports. This is a great grace and privilege. To all the junior and senior high school students, when you are doing job experiences or seeking your own future path, how about visiting such close-by mission fields of the church? I heartily recommend it.

3. What was it that drove Judas to betrayal and to suicide?

Now then, if any sinner turns back from his evil, God does not remember all his transgressions. This is the core message of the book of Ezekiel, and also the message from the whole Bible. Thinking in this way, new understanding also arises with regard to the accounts in the New Testament. As one example, let us look at the account of Judas depicted in the Last Supper of Jesus, Matthew 26:23–24.

23: Jesus replied, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.

24: The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”

—Matthew 26:23–24

Jesus, perceiving the plan of betrayal which Judas, sitting at the meal, was plotting against Him, said, “It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” These stern words of Jesus sound like severe judgment, as if pushing Judas away. However, from the viewpoint that, as shown in Ezekiel, God is a God filled with passion not to give up on man to the very end, but to restore him so that he may live, one can think that Jesus did not simply push Judas away and judge him. Could it not be interpreted that these words were words of love from Jesus, who wanted by all means to give Judas an opportunity to repent until the very end?

I imagine that Jesus, in such an admonition, was waiting for Judas’s repentance.

“Judas, I can see through everything. Because you know me to be the Son of God, you thought that even if I were handed into the enemy’s hand, I could instantly scatter the enemy, and so you tried to use me to obtain money. But woe to the one who betrays the Son of Man.”

Indeed, Judas, realizing the gravity of the sin he had committed against Jesus, regretted it, and went to the chief priests and elders to return the thirty silver coins. I think that at that point Judas finally understood that Jesus had been waiting until the end for him to turn back and repent. Then, what was the final blow that drove Judas, who was trying to turn back, into hanging himself, into suicide? It is in Matthew 27:4.

“I have sinned,” he said, “for I have betrayed innocent blood.” “What is that to us?” they replied. “That’s your responsibility.”

—Matthew 27:4

These words of the chief priests, to Judas who confessed his sin, were words that truly pushed him away and shattered every hope. It was a strong message: “Your failure—you settle it yourself. It is your own responsibility!” The time when a person ceases to choose life and chooses death himself is when he is thrust with self-responsibility, all hope is buried, and he is driven into isolation and loneliness.

4. The present-day message that drives to death, not “Live”

A message that seeks not to say “Live,” but to drive to death. This is no different in the present day. No, in the present day society is even more filled with messages that press people down, making life harder.

The number of suicides in Japan, though it has decreased, is still over 20,000 per year, among the highest in the G7 countries. During the COVID pandemic, the number of suicides among women and children increased greatly, a conspicuous phenomenon peculiar to Japan. Suicides of children—elementary, junior high, and high school students—continue to increase, reaching 527 in 2024, a new record high. Japanese society is filled with the silent pressure opposite to the message “Live,” namely, “It is your responsibility, settle it yourself.” How much are we receiving and recognizing the suffering and pain of children and young people of today?

On July 3, 2024, there came a Supreme Court ruling that compulsory sterilization under the former Eugenic Protection Law was unconstitutional from the time of its enactment. In the written judgment, it was stated: “It is gravely contrary to the spirit of respect for individual dignity and personal worth, discriminatory, and in violation of Article 13 and Article 14, Paragraph 1 of the Constitution, and the legislative act of that provision was unlawful.” The state lost the case and was ordered to pay compensation.

From immediately after the war in 1948 until 1996, for 48 years—indeed for half a century—it is reported that 25,000 people were forced to undergo sterilization due to disability and other reasons, and 59,000 people were forced to have abortions. In reality the numbers are surely higher. The disregard for life, the extermination of human lives by state power, was within an officially recognized system, even in Japan which was not waging war. Also, the influence of the former Eugenic Protection Law, which included the clause “to prevent the birth of inferior descendants,” was strongly related to the rapid increase of abortion numbers after the enactment of the law.

In response to this Supreme Court ruling, the Japan Federation of Bar Associations issued on July 3 the same day a president’s statement demanding full relief for the victims. Also, the Japan Federation of Social Workers, composed of social workers and medical social workers, on July 10 of last year issued a statement of deep reflection and apology, saying, “We social workers, though being a profession based on the principles of human rights and social justice, in the past indeed unconsciously colluded with this grave human rights violation.” I myself, being a social worker, was also one who participated in that sin. However, the response from the Christian side has been very slow, and except for some Christian groups such as “Association of Protection of Small Lives” which protect the dignity of the lives of fetuses, I think that at the general church level there has been little declaration of repentance regarding this matter.

Eugenics thinking is the idea that from birth there are “superior people” and “inferior people,” and that by encouraging the descendants of “superior people” and preventing the descendants of “inferior people,” one seeks the improvement of the human group. Eugenics thinking, over half a century, became embedded in people’s hearts as the devil’s thinking of “prevention of inferior descendants,” namely the extermination of children with disabilities. Looking at Ezekiel 3:17, one of Ezekiel’s missions as a prophet was to be a watchman. Also in modern society Christians have the position of being watchmen of society. But I myself, too, was within unconscious sin. It is no different from the people of Israel in Ezekiel’s time being in sin yet unconscious of it.

Martin Luther King Jr., who led the civil rights movement in America aiming at abolishing racial discrimination against black people, left these words:

“The greatest tragedy is not the violence of bad people, but the silence of good people. Silence is a collaborator hidden in the shadow of violence.”

—Words of Martin Luther King Jr.

5. Being a Party to It and Learning from Those Who Are

The work of *Karashidane*’s after-school day service and such is being continued, but the visiting-type service, because there is presently no one to take it on, has been suspended

since last year, and is currently in recess. I will withhold personal names, but even to church members with severe disabilities, Christian helpers for disability support had been dispatched, and there, beautiful fellowship and living of love were practiced as the work of the Lord. But now it is suspended, and if this year ends as it is, the visiting-type service will be closed down, and the designation of the visiting-type disability support project will be canceled. Do you feel pain in your heart at this point? At the very least, I think God feels pain in His heart. In Ezekiel 22:29–30 it is spoken as follows:

29 The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the foreigner, denying them justice.

30 I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one.

—Ezekiel 22:29–30

God is searching for a person to stand in the gap. The devotional guidebook *Living Life*, which is used for Megumi Church's early morning prayer meetings, is just now handling the Book of Ezekiel this month, and in its meditation essay it is written like this:

Today, we live in an era that is extremely irreverent wherever we look. We must not be indifferent to the evil that fills our surroundings. We are prone to be indifferent to the state of the world, but the Lord is searching for people who will see the world, feel pain in their hearts, and pray... (omission) ...Many of the things we care about, when we think carefully, are things the Lord does not care about at all. On the other hand, the things the Lord feels pain in His heart about, we are often indifferent to. We pray that we also may be able to feel pain and sorrow together with the Lord in the things in which He feels pain and sorrow.

(*Living Life*, August issue, p.147)

Truly, amen.

Also, if there is another reason why our hearts do not feel pain, it would be the lack of being a party to it. What is "being a party to it"? Being a party means persons or groups who cannot escape from the problems or issues they carry. Persons with disabilities, from the disability they have, cannot escape even if they would. However, if one is not a party, even if one shares the problem for a while, when one becomes busy or gets tired of it, one can slip away or run away. I have visited more than 50 churches nationwide up to now, and while every church speaks of the issue of aging, only a few speak of the issue of disability welfare. Aging is an issue of high *being-a-party* because anyone becomes elderly. But in the case of disability, unless one has a disability oneself or is family, there is little *being-a-party*, and one cannot think of it as one's own matter.

However, there is a way we can acquire *being-a-party*. That is, to become a friend of one who is a party. From that friend, one's own sins and failures are pointed out, and sometimes one is hurt, taught, and experiences repentance. As actual examples, I will share as testimonies two such sins and failures of mine.

Testimony ①: The sin of my response to a letter that hurt a disabled person

This is a story from the time when not only LINE but even email was not yet widespread. I had an opportunity to get acquainted with a person with mild intellectual disability who came to church. This was a person who came occasionally to church. We exchanged contact information, and that person wrote me a letter. However, I left my reply unsent for a whole month. Then, I received a second letter expressing anger about why I had not replied. At that time, I was very busy, and I have always been poor at writing letters, even now I rarely write on paper and stationery. But that was just an excuse—without realizing it, I had taken a superior stance and had not treated that person as equal. I was shown my arrogance, and it was a shock like being struck on the head with a hammer. I had not been able to imagine or sympathize with what kind of feelings that person had when writing me a letter so earnestly. It was my sin and failure.

Testimony ②: Being encouraged and healed by a person with severe disability

When I was working as a care manager, I was in charge of supporting a person in their forties afflicted with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a progressive, intractable disease. Let us call this person Mr. A.

When one contracts ALS, muscle strength of the whole body declines, and in a few years one becomes bedridden and requires a respirator. Communication with Mr. A was done through a special arm-mounted notebook PC at the bedside, by slightly moving his lips to a sensor of a communication device, and the PC would speak in a mechanical voice. Meals were also through tube feeding directly into the body.

Mr. A received support with full mobilization of medical insurance, nursing insurance, and disability support systems. Care helpers and visiting nurses came multiple times a day. In a week, visiting physicians, physical therapists for rehab, staff for visiting baths, vendors of respirators and welfare equipment, and staff from a disability support facility that accepted short stays—many people went in and out of his home. My job was to arrange and coordinate all that.

However, many troubles arose. Even in the gaps between day visiting services, suctioning of phlegm was required once every 30 minutes. Since his wife worked to make a living, his elderly mother had to cover that gap, and once, when she leaned against the bedside rail, she suffered a fracture. Also, since many adults came even on the children's days off, one of the children became emotionally unstable from the stress. Moreover, since no helper was

available at night in that region, his wife, who worked, had to suction phlegm every 30 minutes, nearly collapsing from fatigue.

And Mr. A also threw very heavy questions at me. “Every day, many nurses and helpers take care of me, but can you understand the suffering of not even being able to easily say the words ‘thank you’ each time?” “I dream of my own figure, attacked by this disease like a curse, as a dead corpse.” And so on. With such existential, overwhelming deep suffering—spiritual pain—that no easy words of comfort could touch, I was completely daunted, and every time I visited, my feet shrank. I was his second care manager; the first had been one with nursing as their base qualification. So I thought, “Why was I, with welfare as my base qualification, assigned?” “I cannot handle Mr. A’s heavy words and the family’s hard situation.” “I even dream of him truly dead as a corpse. What a disrespectful supporter I am.” Such doubts arose, and I was mentally crushed, wanting to run away.

Then, one time, Mr. A, seeing through my hesitant attitude, said this to me:

“Medical knowledge is important, but even if I am bedridden, I want to watch my daughters’ growth through elementary, junior high, and high school as a father. For that, I want to increase support services. To increase disability support services requires negotiation with the government. That is precisely the work you, Social Worker Inoue, can do. That is why I chose you.”

At that time, I remembered the words of Jesus in John 15:16:

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you.”

John 15:16

And also the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:40:

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Matthew 25:40.

I felt as though I was being spoken to by Jesus, as though I had met Him. My encounter with Mr. A, the things I was taught by him, the many times I was encouraged by him—these have become treasures of my life.

God is a holy, holy, transcendent being beyond comparison with humans. At the same time, He loved each one so much that He gave His only Son to this world, and He cares, loves, has compassion, and never gives up, as though it were His own matter, and He dwells in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. That is, God Himself is the one who has the greatest *being-a-party* toward each of us, placed in the miserable state of being slaves of sin. That is because of God’s rushing love and compassion toward us. Let us look at Hosea 11:8:

“How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboyim? My heart is turned within me; all my compassion is aroused.”

—Hosea 11:8 (Bible, New Japanese Revised 2017 ©2017 Japan Bible Society)

Conclusion

Let me enter into the conclusion of the message.

What is shown from Ezekiel is that we are unconscious of sin, and pressed by God’s message of “Live!” that runs through the whole Bible when we return to God, to live our mission. That mission is, while raising high the light of the Gospel, to stand in the gap of society.

In English, “calling” has the meaning of “occupation.” In the background is that the Reformer Martin Luther theologically reinterpreted the German word *Beruf*, which at that time meant common occupation, and applied to it the concept of “calling/vocation” which had been used only for clergy.

How are we being called by God? Are we daily reading the Bible and listening with the ears of our heart, so as to discern that small voice of God’s calling? Are we not, pressed by daily chores, school homework, entrance exam study, work, and so on, so full that we miss hearing God’s calling? Though the small voice of God is heard, are we not failing to respond, ignoring it? If we do not listen to the small voice of God and are absorbed in something else, immersed, that may become idolatry. In Revelation 3:1 it is written, “You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” Are we not in such a dead state?

We must daily face and respond to these questions—I too am one who admonishes myself in this way. May we not become ones who, with hearts away from God, long after idols such as the wealth, status, and power of this world, becoming spiritually dead, but may we daily repent, receive a new heart and a new spirit, and become ones who truly live, not ruling over others, but making them live.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father of our Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ,

We praise Your name.

Seventy-one years ago the seed of the Gospel was sown in Tsuchiura, and ten years ago the seed of disability welfare, *Karashidane*, was sown in this church. We thank You from our hearts for its rich growth and fruit.

In this modern society full of conformity pressures that drive people to death, full of sin and misery, may we receive the Gospel message of “Live!” that You say, and may we become ones who respond to Your calling and live.

In the beloved name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.